Edward ‘Ted’ Denchfield talking about his time as a Prisoner of War in Italy during World War II

Text in italics = unable to transcribe correctly

We're going to record the memoirs of Edward Denchfield. The date today is the 24th of February 2011. So then I suppose, you just get, you got, you got captured and...
Oh yeah, we got captured. We were brought back to Tripoli actually, just outside Tripoli was, wasn't it? In a camp there.

So you got cut off and captured and then you got sent to Italy, I presume, then?
When we were sent to Italy, we went to Naples, that's where we landed.

Naples?
All the Italians who was on the boat had their shoes off, because they thought they might get torpedoed.

So once, you know, if we go back to Naples, so what happened when you saw, when the boat landed at Naples? Oh, they had transport, well of a sort.

I mean, we was just conducted to this big concentration camp, *50th square* it was. What, in Naples? Yeah, just outside the *Maserata*, just outside Naples. Was it? Oh, right. And so...

And we was in KD-shorts and it was bloody snowing, and that was in bloody well, near Naples. So you'd come from the heat... Into the bloody cold. Into the cold, yeah.

Anyway, we got in. See, in that camp, I had yellow jaundice, and I got an extra little bit of rice a day. Even in there, you see, in a prison of war, you was treated with a little, if you was ill, they helped you.

That's what I say about the Italians. It wasn't like the fascists, the Italian was just as bad as the other, but they were civilised. See, like Greece, they're civilised people, and they deserve better.

Yeah, that was good. So you left, you were in Italy in the camp, so what happened after the camp then? After the camp in, where was it? Naples. Naples.
What happened after the camp at Naples then? How long was you there for?

See, there was an unwritten law. You didn't volunteer to go and do work for the Italians or anybody. If there’s was jobs coming up, and people wanted you on the land and we went to the Po Valley in the north of Italy, because the Italian government was trying to grow sugarcane, and maize, and all that, to stabilise the food rationing. And we were sent to a working

camp there, but we never volunteered for it. In the end, they all had to, just said to get your stuff ready and you're off.

Oh right, and was those camps all under barbed wire and everything? Oh yeah, you had soldiers and... And you had billets, I suppose, huts. Yeah, we were in houses really. Houses.

Yes you know, converted, but there was always a guard to take you to your work with rifles and ammunition. And you saw that you had to plant crops and things. That's right, yeah.

And, see, when we was at, in this working camp, there was potatoes growing in the fields. And if anybody was, happened to be drafted to potatoes, he'd put his hand underneath and grab the potatoes, and then that would go in the stodge at night, that would go in the stew at night or wherever it was, get fresh vegetables, it was very good. And this soldier, Patrone, he used to come round in his straw hat, and when we was growing the sugar beets, you see, you'd take four out, leave one in, take four out, leave one in, all the way down the line see.

And in fact, one, sometimes it didn't grow because somebody put a *dough* underneath it and cut the root. And then he'd come down there, and when he looked at it, he knew what happened, because he could lift his bloody straw hat and jump on it. Sacra Testa de San Pietro Morto, he'd say.

And he could think of it, jumping and jumping on his straw hat. Because he knew bloody well, he'd watch you do it. He'd watch you take four out, leave one in, four out, take one in. He had seen you cut the root off. Did you used to get enough food? We wasn't starving, I wasn't starving.

Did you cook it yourself, some of the food?
No, it was a section, we had a sergeant who was in charge of the food. And anybody who got a potato or something like that, would give it to him, and he'd put it in the stodge at night.

So they weren't bad, the Italians?
Oh no, well, the girls who was in the fields with us, they'd take their shoes off and go through a puddle. They do, yeah. They wouldn't bugger their shoes up, they'd sooner walk through a puddle and get dirty, and that's it. They hadn't got anything. They was poor, Frank. Yeah, very poor.

So that lasted, how long did you last there doing that, a year?
About nine months I was there, and then I got away into Switzerland.

So how did you ever end up in Venice Jail then? How did you end up in Venice Jail?
Oh, well, that was where we... I mean, Mussolini had packed up, there was a scheme on.
I mean, all the time there was a scheme, you had to make a choice. This scheme was to go to Milan and get into Switzerland, right? So off we went into, that's right. Instead of that, somebody infiltrated the gang who was going to take us, and sold us to the... sold us to the Jerries in Naples, in Venice.

And when we thought we was going to go through a door to freedom, we went to the door, and there was Jerry sitting at the bloody table waiting for us. And there was a big pile of notes there, and he'd take a little bit out with his stick and push it over to the bloke who had given us away. That was his blood money, he just pushed it away, he wouldn't give it to him, just pushed it with his stick.

How did you get to Venice? Was that from when you... Oh, we got on trains. I went from Padua, Padua, right across the top of Italy. All the big stations, right across the top of Italy, on a train to Milan.

When we got to Milan, there was a boat there, and you only see him, you had to be bloody sharp or you'd miss him. And he took us outside the railway station, and then we was all right, we was in the woods then. And we had a little fire, and we had a feed, and then a couple of nights later, the boat was ready for us to go over Como.

And we did that, and we got bloody lost. You got lost? Yeah, we did. Oh, we didn't get, well, the chain broke, and it was yours. Anybody could do it.

I mean, if you're following the bloke, you're in single file, you're not in a big heap. There's one bloke knows, the other bloke in front, and if he loses one, we're all buggered, ain't we, behind him. But I went to the old Vescovard, who was in charge of the Roman Catholics, and an old Dow, I don't know what his name was, Liverpool bloke.

I said, well, we've been round here three or four times, and we're not getting anywhere. And he said, yeah, right, I remember that. So we went to the church, woke him up. Then he got up, and “that’s the track”, he says, you keep on it all the time. You've got to be careful with woodmen, because they've got wood camps, getting wood for the industry and all that. And we went up there, and we just passed them and bypassed some of them, and got a bit of food off some of them, and we got into Switzerland.

But even that was, it's not simple getting into Switzerland, getting under the bloody wire, and you're in Switzerland. But it's not that bloody simple, because it bloody twists and turns about. You get under the bloody wire, and then you come to the wire again. Now am I going back into Italy?

OK. So the prison camp in Naples, so Mussolini, what happened to him then? When he got *Rome*, his people turned on him, didn't they? They turned on him. And they let you out of the prison camp, did they? Well, yeah. Because Jerry had taken over, see then. Oh, right. Germans had all the north of Italy. Yeah. Well, that was the industrial part, that was *Scouts*. Yeah.

They got through the Bremmer Pass. They had a good, well, they had a pass. They could get all their lorries through with all the stuff they wanted.

Yeah. So they let you out. So that's when you got on the trains, was it? Oh, yeah. Well, he was with a black market butcher. We were staying with him. Sometimes I used to go out with him at night and get a beast and he'd come back. Within 20 minutes, the bloody animal was cut up and gone.

I see. So once you were out, what was your intentions to move? What was your intentions when you were out? To go to Switzerland.

To get into Switzerland? Yeah. And they helped you on the, so you got on the trains? Yeah. Was there a resistance then that were helping you? There was, but they daren't tell you, did they? They didn't know whether you was a bloody spy for Germany or not.

You see, everybody was – had to trust somebody. Yeah. And if they made a mistake, well, they had it.

Yeah. I mean, that journey across the top of Italy, I think I got off the train five times, because bombs, the Americans were bombing the line. They never hit it. They never hit the bloody railway line, but could have done. But we got through and we got to Milan and made a good connection there with the people who was going to take us to Switzerland and that was it. You know, we rowed across and we got established.

We had to wait for other people to come and join us and they weren't you going to take two or three at the time? Yeah. And that was it.

You always stayed on your own?
Oh, no, there was a lot of prisoners doing the same sort of thing. But you was all *charge*. You never trusted anybody. You couldn't trust anybody. What's he doing here? What's he?

So when you, so if Venice, you was given away, how did you get out of that one? Well, they took us back to the mainland.

Oh, right. See, once you were in Venice, you know, I knew bloody well that you couldn't escape and that only by boat because you was right surrounded by everybody and there's only one way out and Yugoslavia was Tito's mob would take you in, which you was in more danger than anybody else.